

STAKEHOLDERS INTERACTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The argument of knowledge and data, common trust, participation in decision-making processes, and interaction of stakeholders' interests create greater value in higher education. The issue addressed in this article is that the appropriate provision and development of higher education institutions cannot be achieved solely through their own actions. The aim of research is to develop a clarified understanding of the stakeholders of higher education institutions and their interactions. To achieve the aim of the study, a theoretical research method was used, mainly involving the analysis and synthesis of relevant literature and methodological sources. The main research findings include a clearer identification of stakeholders within higher education institutions, the development of stakeholder categories, and the identification of key barriers that hinder effective interaction among these stakeholders.

Keywords: higher education institution, stakeholders, stakeholder interaction.

Introduction

One of the goals of any country is to ensure the appropriate quality of higher education. From the perspective of stakeholder theory, any organisation, including a higher education institution, occurs to meet the requirements of all stakeholders. In understanding stakeholder theory, higher education institutions find themselves at the intersection of various stakeholder interests. This can either facilitate or hinder the successful achievement of all parties' goals. A higher education institution that does not orient its activities toward stakeholder needs cannot achieve its strategic objectives and ensure sustainable development. Different stakeholders in various higher education institutions may differ in their perceptions and definitions of development criteria. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasise the significance of such interactions. The object of this study is stakeholder interaction within higher education institutions, while the aim is to identify and categorise key stakeholders, as well as analyse the barriers that affect their effective collaboration. The problem and importance addressed in this article arise from the fact that appropriate service provision and development by higher education institutions cannot be achieved solely through their own actions but also requires the involvement of other stakeholders and ensuring their mutual interactions.

Literature Review. Stakeholder theory and its application to organizational management and development is a widely studied topic that initially emerged from Freeman's (1984) work *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. In recent years, this theory has also been increasingly applied in the context of higher education, recognizing that all those involved in the educational process are stakeholders with a significant role in the development of the institution (Langrafe de Freitas Langrafe et al., 2020; Stocker, Bilodeau & Kettunen, 2020). The interaction between higher education institutions and their communities is studied by authors such as Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno (2008), who emphasize the complexity of this interaction and its dependence on the combination of interests and resources of different stakeholders. Kubsch and Meyer (2023) also analyze institutional complexity and stakeholder segmentation in higher education management, while Greenwood and Van Buren (2023) pay attention to the motivation and partnership dynamics that affect university management. Similarly, Andersen, Kjeldsen and Pedersen (2021) provide theoretical insights into how legitimacy, power and urgency shape stakeholder

management strategies in the public sector, which can also be applied to higher education institutions. Lice et al. (2023) identify significant barriers that hinder universities from engaging more with diverse stakeholders, such as reward structures and lack of an entrepreneurial culture. The literature also suggests that successful stakeholder engagement in higher education institutions requires a strategic approach that considers both the potential for long-term collaboration and the creation of shared value (Tantalo & Priem, 2014; Van der Wal, de Graaf & Lasthuizen, 2021). Thus, based on previous research, this study develops a clearer classification of stakeholders and identifies the main obstacles to their effective cooperation, offering recommendations for sustainable interaction that can contribute to both university and regional and national development (Leal Filho et al., 2025; Syed et al., 2024).

Methodology. To achieve the aim of this study, a theoretical research approach was applied. Methods included comparative and conceptual analysis of scientific and methodological literature linked to stakeholder theory in higher education. Distinct attention was given to identifying stakeholder groups, their roles, and potential challenges in their interaction. This approach provided a structured basis for understanding stakeholder relationships in the background of higher education institutions. The practical application of results, conclusions, and recommendations can help improve relationships with stakeholders, thus promoting the strategic development of higher education institutions, which is important for society.

The author's original contribution lies in the synthesis of current theories to develop a stakeholder categorisation model made-to-order exactly to higher education institutions. Additionally, the author finds significant barriers that hinder effective stakeholder interactions and offers a framework for understanding these dynamics. This approach provides new understandings into how institutions can improve stakeholder interaction.

1. Stakeholders of Higher Education Institutions

Stakeholder theory can also be useful in higher education to help clarify the relationships among them. By collaborating with stakeholders, higher education institutions can improve their reputation, build strong partnerships, and generate value for stakeholders. Furthermore, by working with internal stakeholders, universities can foster a positive work and learning environment, promote a culture of continuous improvement, and increase stakeholder satisfaction and commitment. Such efforts increase the institution's effectiveness, productivity, and success, resulting in better-prepared students equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the job market and drive economic growth (Langrafe de Freitas Langrafe et al., 2020). Collaboration with external stakeholders provides higher education institutions with competitive advantages and sustainability (Lice et al., 2023).

The new paradigm dictates that higher education institutions need to seek new mechanisms for developing modern trajectories of growth in conditions of instability and uncertainty. The increasing emphasis on the use of stakeholder approaches necessitates a focus on ensuring stakeholder interaction to enhance the implementation of development strategies.

In Latvia, several significant regulations have been adopted that highlight the status of ensuring quality in higher education and the cornerstone of this process - stakeholder participation. For example, the Latvian National Development Plan for 2021 - 2027 aims to ensure a comprehensive evaluation process for higher education quality to guarantee the quality of higher education and promote an internal quality culture within universities, including reviewing the possibility of implementing cyclical university accreditation (National Development Plan, 2020).

The term "stakeholders" was first used in the works of researchers at Stanford Research Institute in 1963, but it gained broader application only in the 1990s (Pedrini & Ferri, 2019). The classical understanding of this concept was developed by E. Freeman, who defined it as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984). The term "stakeholder" can refer to a wide range of individuals, and managing stakeholders can be complex; therefore, it is crucial to identify stakeholders as accurately as possible and determine their influence

(Hassan & Müller, 2024). In this context, stakeholders can represent either opportunities or threats to the organisation (Shafique & Gabriel, 2022).

Research on stakeholder issues in public organizations is limited, and there appears to be a dearth of studies specifically focusing on the higher education sector. While some stakeholder groups identified in private sector organizations may also apply to higher education institutions, there is a need for deeper exploration of this issue, especially considering the unique nature of higher education institutions' operations and their responsibility to society as a whole. Higher education institutions face a particularly complex stakeholder environment that presents additional challenges (Stocker et al., 2020).

Most academic research on stakeholders in higher education is based on theoretical approaches. The approach most used is rooted in corporate governance literature, assuming that higher education institutions, as autonomous entities, must manage various stakeholders to succeed (Syed et al., 2024). The stakeholder model is effectively applied to higher education institutions, suggesting that responses to stakeholder demands depend on these parties' legitimacy, power, and urgency. Which stakeholder demands are considered legitimate largely depends on political norms and institutional frameworks (Leal Filho et al., 2025).

When examining institutional issues in stakeholder interactions within higher education, N. Savicka distinguishes between external stakeholders—families, employers, society, the state - and internal stakeholders - relevant ministries, university management, students, academic staff. At the same time, the central subject upon which the educational system relies is the individual who is also the primary stakeholder (Kubsch & Meyer, 2023).

Burrows classifies stakeholders in higher education institutions into internal (e.g., employees, students) and external stakeholders (e.g., employers, various community representatives, media) (Burrows, 1999). Some of these groups have relatively low levels of interest and engagement to be genuinely considered stakeholders (Stocker et al., 2020). Two groups of stakeholders have gained particularly recognised roles in various higher education issues: students and employers. The increasing significance of these groups can be associated with student feedback being seen as an expression of consumer satisfaction and employers' views on the quality of the educational market.

The stakeholder theory can also be useful in higher education to help clarify the relationships among them. By collaborating with stakeholders, higher education institutions can enhance their reputation, build strong partnerships, and create value for stakeholders. Furthermore, by working with internal stakeholders, universities can foster a positive work and learning environment, promote a culture of continuous improvement, and increase stakeholder satisfaction and commitment. Such efforts increase the institution's effectiveness, productivity, and success, resulting in better-prepared students equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the job market and drive economic growth (Van der Wal et al., 2021). Working with outside groups gives colleges and universities an edge in the market and makes them more sustainable (Lice, 2023).

According to different ways of classifying stakeholders in higher education, there can be more than ten of them. These include staff and students, who directly provide and use higher education services, as well as companies and business associations, other higher education institutions (as competitors), banks and other financial funds, public organisations, investors and sponsors, recruitment agencies, scientific publishers and scientific associations, and more.

There are different views on who should be considered a stakeholder in higher education, depending on how narrow or broad the concept is. For the purposes of this study, the author suggests that individuals or their organisations that are directly or indirectly involved in the operations of higher education institutions should be seen as stakeholders. This means that higher education institutions influence their status and interests (professional, social, financial) and are related to determining the development priorities of higher education institutions. Conversely, individuals or their organizational entities who can influence higher education institutions - their status and interests (professional, social, financial) - are also considered

stakeholders. The realization of such stakeholders' intentions, needs, and interests is based on interaction with higher education institutions regarding the provision and consumption of higher education services.

Indirect stakeholders also have an impact on the quality of education through management and improve the reputation of higher education institutions for producing top-notch specialists in a competitive job market (Figure 1).

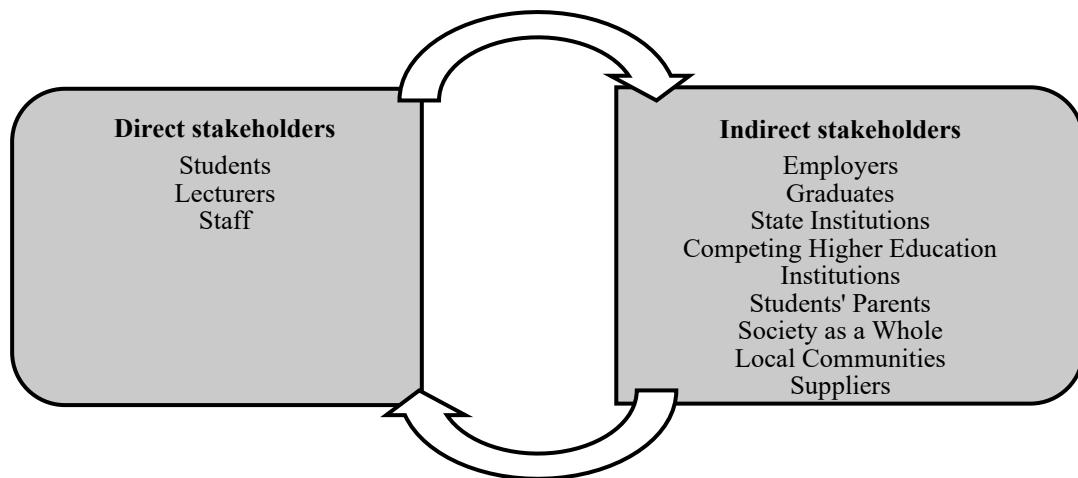


Figure 1. Categories of Stakeholders in Higher Education Institutions

Source: made by the author

All stakeholders in the process of ensuring the quality of higher education can act as both subjects and objects. Clearly, both categories can be considered as key elements in the provision and consumption of higher education services. From this, it can be concluded that a quality educational product can only be created because of close collaboration with all stakeholders.

H. Mintzberg emphasises the importance of stakeholders in strategic organisational management. He believes that the main task in this process is to integrate the relationships and interests of stakeholders on the path to long-term organizational success (Mintzberg, 2013).

The stakeholder approach highlights the significance of investment in relationships with those interested in the development of higher education institutions. This approach allows for the establishment of strategic goals for higher education institutions and aligns them with the demands of the external environment.

Despite the popularity of the stakeholder approach, research also highlights several significant limitations. First, the theory is often criticized for being too general in its interpretation, as there are no clear criteria for which stakeholders are considered priority and with what intensity of influence (Syed et al., 2024). This can create a risk that higher education institutions, trying to respond to all demands, become "do-gooders for all" organizations, which reduces the strategic focus of the institution and can slow down the speed and quality of decision-making. Second, there are often conflicts in stakeholder interests, as, for example, students' demands for lower fees may conflict with higher education institutions' goal of ensuring higher research capacity. Similarly, the needs of employers do not always coincide with the emphasis of academic staff on fundamental knowledge and academic freedom. And third, the application of stakeholder theory is limited by political and regulatory factors. Research shows that stakeholder engagement in the governance of higher education institutions is often formal and lacks structural guarantees to ensure that the voices of different stakeholders are heard equally (Leal Filho et al., 2025). This means that a stakeholder approach in itself does not guarantee balanced decision-making. It needs to be complemented by mechanisms that ensure transparency and accountability.

2. Interaction of Stakeholders in Higher Education Institutions

It is essential to reiterate that stakeholders are characterised by three relational attributes: legitimacy, power, and urgency of claims. By combining these attributes, it is possible to provide suggestions for assessing their significance to organisational leaders and to determine the directions of interaction (Andersen et al., 2021). Thus, stakeholder theory allows for the alignment of interests among all parties and increases the competitiveness of each. However, the choice of the interaction strategy depends on the development strategy of the higher education institution and its priorities.

The motivation of stakeholders can be both altruistic, based on concern for higher education institutions and society, and egoistic, based on personal or private interests. In some cases, the combination of both principles can more closely resemble interaction. However, it is important that this interaction is based on partnership principles (Greenwood & Van Buren, 2023).

The mission of higher education institutions encompasses all activities related to the creation, utilisation, application, and exploitation of knowledge, skills, and resources beyond the academic environment. In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on higher education and the higher education system to shift focus from primarily teaching and conducting research to encompassing a broader range of activities that contribute to society (Lice et al., 2023). Thus, by establishing effective relationships with stakeholders, the goal of these interactions is to promote social, cultural, and economic development in society.

The inducement - contribution concept can be utilized to ensure stakeholder interaction, describing the relationships between an organization and its stakeholders, where each party both contributes and receives value in return. Inducement refers to the rewards that higher education institutions offer their stakeholders, which can be both material and immaterial, such as recognition - essentially anything that motivates specific actions. Contribution is what stakeholders provide to the higher education institution, such as loyalty and active participation.

This theory bears similarities to social and motivational theories. One of the first to describe the interaction between organisations and stakeholders in this way were Cyert and March (1963) (Lu, 2023). The authors proposed the idea that an organisation is a place where a unique exchange process occurs among various stakeholders, where the organization achieves its goals while each stakeholder gains something valuable.

Stakeholder interaction occurs when one planned action simultaneously creates new worth for two or more significant groups of stakeholders without diminishing value for any other essential stakeholder group. The synergy of stakeholders generates new values and opportunities, enhancing value for multiple groups without reducing value for any group (Wang, & Bansal, 2023).

For stakeholder interaction to be effective, organizational leaders (especially top-level managers) must act as innovative entrepreneurs, constantly seeking chances to generate value for multiple stakeholder groups simultaneously. The goal of this "search for synergy" is to increase the "size of the pie" accessible to two or more stakeholder groups through a single strategic act or joined set of activities - that is, a development strategy (Tantalo & Priem, 2014).

Although research indicates pure benefits from stakeholder engagement in higher education, everyday exercise shows that higher education institutions primarily collaborate only with traditional stakeholders, such as students, researchers, research funders, etc. Jongbloed, Ender, and Salerno (2008) have identified three main barriers that prevent higher education institutions from engaging more broadly with society, including collaboration with industry:

1. Determination of research programmes and educational offerings: The programme offerings may significantly differ from the expressed demands of the private sector.
2. Internal remuneration structure: Funding parameters frequently do not comprise compensation for broader engagement or interaction with the community; interaction with non-academic communities is most often not considered in research evaluation criteria.

3. Absence of entrepreneurial culture: The individuality of academic staff is characterised by individuality in thinking and action and a reluctance to conform to outside demands (Lice et al., 2023).

To implement interaction in practice, it is recommended to promote awareness and develop incentives to overcome these barriers (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

Three fundamental methods can be used to achieve stakeholder interaction (Tantalo & Priem, 2014):

1. Creating Value for One Stakeholder Group: This method involves increasing the value for one significant group of stakeholders without negatively affecting the value received by another significant group. Tantalo and Priem (2014) refer to this approach as "value creation for one stakeholder."

2. Complementary Use Values: Managers identify needs that complement each other across two or more significant stakeholder groups. Tantalo and Priem (2014) describe this as "complementary use values." Each significant stakeholder group has multiple values - an innovation by one manager can improve one type of price for one stakeholder group while simultaneously growing another type of value for a different group, without destructively impacting any other significant stakeholder group.

3. Secondary Efficiencies: This involves one, two, or more significant stakeholder groups receiving increased value from a single strategic novelty. This is likely to result in better communication and collaboration among members of these significant stakeholder groups, thereby positively influencing the behavior of other essential stakeholder groups. Tantalo and Priem (2014) refer to this as "secondary efficiencies."

The author offers practical examples that align with Tantalo and Priem's (2014) rules, explaining this method within the context of higher education. For instance, increasing the worth for one stakeholder group without negatively affecting another can be illustrated by the accessibility of remote lectures for students, which can significantly reduce time and financial costs while also causing less environmental harm in commuting to in-person classes. Meanwhile, this arrangement does not significantly affect the value of the other stakeholder group, the lecturer, who also benefits from it. An example of "complementary use values" is the decision to organize internships for students at local companies: this positively impacts both students' opportunities to gain practical knowledge and meets the interests of local employers and communities. In contrast, an example of "secondary efficiencies" is related to the use of Problem-Based Learning—solving real company problems involving students and lecturers: this improves communication among multiple stakeholders and influences the behavior of other stakeholder groups positively.

Findings

This section summarizes the research's conclusions and recommendations and offers perspectives for future studies in this area. Based on the analysis, the study defines stakeholders of higher education institutions as organizational entities or individuals who benefit from the consequences of activities and contribute to its development, comprising strategic growth. The originality of this study deceits in the classification of stakeholders and the identification of barriers that delay their effective cooperation. Their level of influence depends on the forms of interaction, the extent of collaboration, and the connection to the operations of the higher education institution. The results suggest that the degree of influence each stakeholder has depends on the nature and frequency of their interaction, the depth of collaboration, and the proximity of their goals to the institution's core operations.

To set productive long-term stakeholder engagement, higher education institutions should proactively inspire stakeholder response. They should plan activities based on what they think will happen instead of what is happening now. This comprises gathering both direct and indirect feedback, and adopting a forward-looking approach to planning institutional activities based on predictable requirements rather than solely reacting to current conditions. At the same time, the strategic way of interactions must align with the institution's main purposes. All parties involved should direct their interaction towards their own development. It will be effective only if each party considers the interests and needs of the others.

This can be operationalized through specific tools, such as requesting stakeholders to provide current information on issues or summarizing their updates, conducting surveys to identify relevant topics, exploring legislation and/or available literature, and determining a list of such issues. Subsequent phases should involve stakeholder discussions to co-develop implementation strategies.

Initiators of interaction can be representatives from any stakeholder group. The interaction process must be continuous; it cannot be limited to individual employee initiatives but must be stable and consistently provided. However, sustainable cooperation requires institutional promise rather than isolated separate initiatives. Therefore, higher education institutions should ensure the legitimization and institutionalization of interactions and transform them into everyday practices through formal structures and strategic planning. Interaction should benefit both state and regional development. Such efforts can benefit regional and state development by positioning educational outcomes with societal, economic and other needs.

Higher education institutions can encourage stakeholder interaction by clearly defining stakeholders (i.e., interaction partners), getting them involved in interactions through personal conversations, targeted letters, and meetings, defining regulatory and organizational interactions by creating regulatory documents and changing employee responsibilities, and making a cooperation plan that lists practical activities and their outcomes, such as setting up internships that create a certain number of new jobs. For example, partnerships may contain the creation of internship programs that result in measurable job creation, thus improving both institutional performance and labor market significance.

Adhering to these results can provide a strong impetus for the development of higher education institutions and enhance their competitiveness. The practical value of these conclusions lies in their applicability to various areas:

1. For academic institutions: better strategic arrangement with stakeholder expectations;
2. For students: improved access to real-world experience and occupation opportunities;
3. For businesses: admission to talent and cooperative innovation;
4. For regional development: more effective use of educational resources to support growth goals.

Nevertheless, the author admits that certain features of stakeholder interaction continue insufficiently researched. Future studies should examine the integration of stakeholder relations into the sustainable development processes of both higher education institutions and direct and indirect stakeholders.

In conclusion, it can be stated that productive interaction among stakeholders in higher education institutions can become a significant factor not only in the development of higher education institutions but also in the overall development of regions and countries. The results of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how stakeholder collaboration can be organised, enhanced, and embedded into institutional strategy, offering a framework for practical application and further investigation.

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SUINTERESUOTUJŲ ŠALIŲ SĄVEIKA AUKŠTAJAME MOKSLE

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama suinteresuotujų šalių sąveika aukštojo mokslo institucijose, remiantis suinteresuotujų šalių teorija. Siekiant atskleisti, kas yra šios institucijos suinteresuotosios šalys, buvo analizuojama moksline literatūra ir taikomi teoriniai metodai. Nustatyta, kad suinteresuotosios šalys gali būti tiek fiziniai asmenys, tiek organizacijos, turinčios įtakos institucijų veiklai arba gaunančios iš jos naudą. Tyime išskiriamos pagrindinės suinteresuotujų šalių grupės ir jų sąveikos sudėtingumą lemiantys veiksniai.

Straipsnyje pabrėžiama, kad tvari aukštojo mokslo institucijų plėtra neįmanoma be aktyvaus visų suinteresuotujų šalių įsitraukimo, grįžtamojo ryšio ir bendradarbiavimo. Praktinės įžvalgos leidžia aukštojo mokslo institucijoms geriau planuoti strateginius veiksmus, stiprinti partnerystę ir prisidėti prie regioninio bei nacionalinio vystymosi. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiamos rekomendacijos, kaip stiprinti ilgalaikę ir struktūrizuotą sąveiką su suinteresuotosiomis šalimis, bei nurodomos tolesnių tyrimų kryptys.

Pagrindiniai tyrimo išvados rodo, kad veiksminga suinteresuotujų šalių sąveika priklauso nuo aiškios jų identifikacijos, nuolatinio ir struktūruoto dialogo bei tarpusavio pasitikėjimo. Aukštojo mokslo institucijos turi iniciuoti ir skatinti atvirą komunikaciją, sistemingai rinkti ir analizuoti grįžtamajį ryšį, taip užtikrindamas, kad sprendimai atitinktų suinteresuotujų šalių lūkesčius ir poreikius. Taip pat svarbu integruoti suinteresuotujų šalių interesus į ilgalaikę strateginę plėtrą, kas didina institucijų konkurencingumą ir jų poveikį regiono plėtrai.

Be to, tyrimas atskleidė, kad bendradarbiavimas su verslo sektorius, savivaldos bei kitų institucijų atstovais suteikia galimybę gerinti studijų kokybę ir praktiką, skatina inovacijas bei darbo rinkos poreikių atitikimą. Nepaisant to, lieka neištirtų sričių, ypač susijusių su sąveikos strateginiu įtvirtinimu ir jos poveikio ilgalaikiu vertinimu. Todėl rekomenduojama vykdyti tolesnius tyrimus, orientuotus į suinteresuotujų šalių sąveikos modelių kūrimą ir jų integravimą į aukštojo mokslo valdymo sistemas.

Apibendrinant, produktyvi suinteresuotujų šalių sąveika gali tapti esminių veiksniu ne tik aukštojo mokslo institucijų vystymuisi, bet ir platesniams regionų bei šalies socialiniam ir ekonominiam progresui.

Šio tyrimo objektas yra suinteresuotujų šalių sąveika aukštojo mokslo institucijose, o tikslas – nustatyti ir suskirstyti į kategorijas pagrindines suinteresuotąsias šalis, taip pat išanalizuoti kliūtis, trukdantys jų veiksmingam bendradarbiavimui. Tyrimo tikslas – aiškiai suprasti aukštojo mokslo institucijų suinteresuotąsias šalis ir jų sąveiką. Tyrimo tikslui pasiekti buvo naudojamas teorinis tyrimo metodas, daugiausia apimantis atitinkamos literatūros ir metodologinių šaltinių analizę ir sintezę.

Raktiniai žodžiai: aukštojo mokslo įstaiga, suinteresuotosios šalys, suinteresuotujų šalių sąveika.